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ABSTRACT

Although speech and writing both contain functional varieties as well as many similar mechanical aspects, mature writing contains a number of conventions (words, idioms, constructions) rarely found in mainstream native speech. Among areas of contrast are vocabulary, syntactic constructions--especially punctuation--and the more complex use of auxiliaries in writing. These differences between speech and writing affect the English curriculum in the teaching of reading, composition, and literature. Reading and writing instruction should be approached systematically with increasingly sophisticated constructions and with the realization that reading is a passive recognition of symbols while writing is the active production of symbols. Leading students to understand and appreciate literature leads them to understand and enjoy the language they write. (JM)

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Speech Is Speech, and Prose Is Prose, And (N)ever the Twain....

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--Do you wish to write poetry?
--No, no. Not poetry.
--Ah, then prose?
--No. Not prose and not poetry.
--But it must be one or the other.
--Why?
--Because there are only prose or poetry.
--Only prose or poetry?
--Yes, sir. Whatever is not prose is poetry; and whatever is not poetry is prose.
--If someone speaks... What's that?
--Prose.
--Really? When I say 'Nichole, bring me my slippers and nightcap'... That's prose?
--Yes indeed.
--Well! I've been speaking prose for more than forty years without knowing a thing about it.

Molière, The Bourgeois Gentleman.

When the teacher of Molière's Bourgeois Gentleman triumphantly shows that "Nicole, bring me my slippers and nightcap" is prose, he is the type of numerous composition teachers who tell students to write the way they speak--and are then mortified by the result. For, while being natural--or writing the way you talk--is a first step in overcoming the common paralysis induced by expanses of blank paper, it is hardly the same thing as writing mature prose. Quite to the contrary, in fact, mature writing contains any number of conventions seldom or never found in mainstream native speech. And if this is not readily apparent to many of us, it is because long intimacy with

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writing has changed elements of our speech--removing it from the mainstream. Thus, even if it might be acceptable for us to write the way we speak, it is certainly not acceptable for our students to write the way they speak. And we don't write the way we speak, anyhow.

While most teachers intuitively feel that this is true, the depth of this feeling is usually limited to such insights as the following, taken from a fairly recent textbook for prospective high school English teachers: "The act of writing, by virtue of its permanence and especially its separation from the reader, demands much more careful attention than speech. . . . Unless sentences as well as paragraphs reveal a sure grasp of concepts and their relationships, a reader may become either confused or disinterested."[1] (And sic on "disinterested.") Thus, the forty-nine page chapter entitled "Written Expression" discusses the nature of rhetoric and clear thinking, but has only one sentence on the distinctive constructions of writing, the suggestion that teachers "emphasize especially the free noun cluster, the non-restrictive appositive, the verbid clauses and absolutes. . . ."[2] Yet even this little is preferable to the apparent confusion of rhetoric and structure that seems to have motivated another author to say that "the purpose and method of a composition wield larger and more significant effects on style than the medium. . . . the pervasive influence of purpose and method extends to the narrowest aspects of style, even to the mechanics of handling the sentence."[3] And this, in turn, motivates the false conclusion that "whether one is writing or speaking he is subject to the same conventions of grammar, syntax, semantics." Now, while many--or even most--aspects of mechanics are similar, other very significant ones are undoubtedly functions of the medium of writing itself.

Among the first scholars to systematically investigate variable usage in America was John Kenyon, who distinguished between levels which, with their connotation of higher and lower

refer to value judgements, and varieties which refer to functional adaptations to differing contexts.[4] He thus recognized intersecting vertical and horizontal parameters labeled "Standard / Substandard" and "Formal / Informal" respectively. Unfortunately, within his cultural category "Substandard" he includes the Molièrean term "illiterate speech." Terminologically more careful, Martin Joos does not mix literacy with speech in The Five Clocks, in which he posits five situational varieties of spoken English--intimate, casual, consultative, formal, frozen--characterized by such things as complexity of sentence structure, expectation of feedback, and the speaker's estimate of shared experience with the hearer. Moreover, Joos argues that these varieties exist in the speech of all adults--intimate and casual even in the speech of the most educated and sophisticated, formal and frozen even in that of the uneducated and unsophisticated. And that he is correct is obvious to anyone who has ever thought about why, at one extreme, saying that someone "talks like a book" is not a compliment, or why, at the other extreme, broadcast interviews elicit such defromed syntax and vocabulary from municipal service employees and blue-collar workers.

Extending this approach to prose, Henry Gleason Jr. shows, in Linguistics and English Grammar (pp. 367-373), how situational varieties of writing parallel, though by no means coincide with, those of speech. In fact, two of Gleason's major insights are, one, that the very nature of writing precludes an "intimate" register, and, two, that "informal" writing, though functionally equivalent to "casual" speech, is structurally closer to the more formal "consultative." For as Robert Allen notes about his own work in English Grammars and English Grammar (p. 158): ". . . saying that this is a grammar of written English is not the same as saying that it is a grammar of formal English. Written English includes all the kinds of English that appear in writing--informal as well as formal." And, going one step further, we should realize

that while all speakers and writers have functional varieties the specific structural details will vary; for those of us whose lives center on literacy, consultative or even casual speech may adopt some of the features of writing, perhaps becoming more structured and consciously stylistic than even the writing of many laypeople. But this does not deny the fact that each person's speech differs from that person's writing.

It is to be regretted, therefore, that so little has been done to fill in the linguistic details of these varieties in mainstream usage and even less to study their consequences to the English curriculum. Yet it would seem to follow that if there are written structures not found in speech, they will not be learned during normal childhood language acquisition. And if this is true, then learning to read and write, for example, is not merely learning the correspondence between aural and visual symbols; it is learning the symbols for specifically written--and therefore previously unknown--linguistic elements, the absence of which at least partially accounts for the unacceptable compositions of students who write like they talk. Of course, in theory this has long been known by linguists, W. Nelson Francis, for one, having pointed out twenty years ago that "to a greater or less degree, the child who is learning to read is also encountering a new dialect. . . . Even in the minimum case, where he has always heard standard English carefully spoken, he will find words, idioms, and constructions in his reading materials that are seldom if ever used in ordinary speech."[5]

Since the difference between one's active and passive vocabulary is well-known and since vocabulary enrichment is an entrenched part of English programs, nothing more needs to be said about the words and idioms of writing. But it is worthwhile to look more closely at the syntactic constructions of even semiformal writing that are seldom if ever used in ordinary--that is, casual and consultative--speech.

The most obvious area of contrast is punctuation. While it might intuitively seem that punctuation in writing corresponds to intonation in speech, we can readily see that this is not true--that in fact much punctuation signals specifically written syntax. For example, though many commas represent pauses, there is no analog in speech to the commas appearing in sentence 1:

1. Every Tom, Dick, and Harry has juice, coffee, toast, bacon and eggs for breakfast.

Indeed, if there is a pause in this sentence, it is between Harry and has, the end of the subject and the beginning of the predicate; and there is no punctuation at that point. Moreover, though many pauses are marked by periods, there is no analog in speech to the difference between a period and a semicolon. For as Charles Fries showed in The Structure of English (pp.10-11), even to English teachers the difference is one of widely varying personal preference. Clearly, these conventions must be taught. And in general they are.

But now consider the dash. This device wreaks havoc on the reading of college freshmen and is almost nonexistent in the writing of my graduate students. Moreover--or, perhaps, this is a cause, not a concomitant fact--it is barely nodded at in most grammar texts and downgraded where it is mentioned. Thus, one of the fullest discussions that I have found in a high school text contains the widespread caveat that "over-dependence on the dash . . . reduces its emphatic effect and suggests a lack of maturity and restraint in the writer's style."[6] So too the fullest discussion in a college text refers to the dash as "one of those expository aids best monitored by restraint."[7] Yet, though both texts are less than ten years old, as long ago as 1948, George Summey Jr., in American Punctuation (p. 162), noted that in his survey of the most respected periodicals and columnists of the time "the most frequent interior mark except the comma is the dash," occurring in 8.6% of the sentences surveyed. And, lest someone

think that in current good usage the dash is avoided, in my own very informal check of these figures against more recent samples, dashes appeared in about 20% of the sentences on the editorial and Op-Ed pages of the New York Times and in the reportage of Newsweek. And horror of prescriptive stylistic horrors, Newsweek (March 11, 1974) even had this paragraph--slightly edited for brevity--in which each of the five sentences contains a dash:

> The sealed report, written by the prosecutors and cleared with the grand jury, was a guide to the questions they thought somebody should ask the President; they saw only one alternative forum--a court of impeachment. The grand jury, Newsweek learned, shared the prosecution's belief that--but for his station--Mr. Nixon ought to have been answerable to some sort of criminal charge. This conclusion, according to Newsweek's sources, turned largely on evidence--presumably including the March 21 tapes--that the President at least knew of the hush-money payments. The prosecutors believed Mr. Nixon was accordingly liable at a minimum to a charge of misprision of a felony--failing either to report or stop the commission of a crime. But, one source told Newsweek, they felt the evidence was stronger than that--strong enough to enmesh the President as a knowing party to the cover-up.

It is certainly significant, moreover, that all of these dashes signal constructions that do not seem to have close analogs in spoken syntax, being expressed instead through additional sentences or explanatory phrases.[8]

Also apparently lacking analogs in mainstream speech are the four constructions in the paragraph set off by commas:

2. The sealed report, written by the prosecutors and cleared with the grand jury, was . . . .
3. The grand jury, Newsweek learned, shared . . . .
4. This conclusion, according to Newsweek's sources, turned . . . .
5. But, one source told Newsweek, they felt . . . .

Example 2 is a non-restrictive modifier--one of the most pervasive

features of mature writing, but probably unheard (of) in mainstream speech, being used only by highly literate people who have borrowed it from writing. As English teachers, we have all measured out our lives with lessons on non-restrictive modifiers, so no additional testimonials are needed of the difficulty students have with this construction. But it should be said that the probable cause of the difficulty is the absence of the construction from speech.

On the other hand, any difficulty connected with sentence 5 arises from its similarity to the spoken (and written) sentence 6:

6. But one source told Newsweek they felt . . . .

For, since the two constructions seem to be either identical in meaning or only insignificantly different, it may appear that the two are actually one. School grammars tend to list this structure and those in sentences 3 and 4 as either expletives or parentheticals; but they are surely a much more integral part of the sentence than a true parenthetical, and one's linguistic intuition rebels against classing them with "you know" or expletive there and it. A better analysis is that they stand midway between direct and indirect quotation and that they are, paradoxically, embedded independent structures. But whatever name is given to them, they certainly seem to represent a construction unique to writing.[9]

Related to the non-restrictive modifier is the appositive adjective phrase, for example

7. The stranger, tall and menacing, petted the pussycat.

This differs from the classic non-restrictive modifier because there is no contrasting restrictive, such as

8. X The stranger tall and menacing petted the pussycat.

Moreover, it seems to be limited to true adjectives; present and past participles functioning as adjectivals do have the restrictive/non-restrictive contrast, as in 9-12:

9. The team battered and beaten was ours.
10. The team, battered and beaten, was unbowed.

11. The politician hemming and hawing is our Congressperson.
12. The politician, hemming and hawing, ducked the question.

Though all three of these adjectivals can be attributive to the noun in speech, in writing they can also be attributive to the noun phrase. Thus, both speech and writing have 13-15:

13. The tall and menacing stranger . . . .
14. The battered and beaten team . . . .
15. The hemming and hawing politician . . . .

But only writing has 16-18:

16. Tall and menacing, the stranger . . . .
17. Battered and beaten, the team . . . .
18. Hemming and hawing, the politician . . . .

Superficially similar to these are such participial absolutes as

19. Having finished dinner, we left.

Yet, while the construction in 16-18 is clearly adjectival, the one in 19 may actually be a sentence adverbial, as may be seen by comparing sentences 20-23:

20. Smiling broadly, we left. (adjectival)
21. Finishing dinner, we left. (adjectival?)
22. Having finished dinner, we left. (adverbial?)
23. After having finished dinner, we left. (adverbial)

Ignoring the problem of nomenclature, however, it is clear that none of these is likely to occur in mainstream speech, though they are all very common in writing--as in sentences 24-25 taken from The New Yorker (March 18, 1974):

24. Sitting at the piano, he sang in a soft baritone. After doing the standards, he sang several songs he had written himself.

25. She blushed furiously, apparently having hoped to get away with anonimity.

Moreover, the verb phrases "having hoped" and "had written" bring us to another area of speech/writing contrast--the full use of the auxiliaries. It is theoretically possible to produce a sequence of auxiliaries like "might have been being eaten" which could appear in such a sentence as

26. The ten billion and first hamburger might have been being eaten at the very moment that they were announcing that the ten billionth had been eaten.

Of course such extreme examples are not common, but, in general, writing contains more complex auxiliaries than speech does--especially in signaling sequence of tenses. Thus, in sentence 24 "songs he had written" would probably occur in speech as "songs he wrote" and "having hoped" in 25 as "since she hoped."

This is not to say that the syntax of writing is necessarily more complex or more difficult than that of speech. As William Norris notes, "Expository writing makes use of a more limited range of sentence types than speech. Statements predominate; questions are rarer. . . . edited written English is more regular and 'correct'. . . ."[10] Part of this regularity obviously compensates for the absence of the speaker-hearer interaction that serves to clear things up in speech. But this is only part of the explanation. For, while there can be no disagreement with Kellogg Hunt's goal of prose that is "incapable of being misunderstood even on a first reading,"[11] some specifically written constructions are incapable of being so read. One such is the "Not this, but that" construction, which corresponds to the "This. Not that." of speech, and whose conclusion must be read before the beginning can be understood. For example, the sentence beginning

27. Not the cost of food, but . . . .

may be followed by three different types of phrase, each

requiring a different reading of "cost of food":

28. Not the cost of food, but its quality bothers people.
29. Not the cost of food, but the cost of housing bothers people.
30. Not the cost of food, but the quality of life bothers people.

But even if there is no simple explanation as to why written syntax is different from spoken, there can be no doubt that it is different. And this difference has obvious consequences to the English curriculum---to the teaching of reading, composition, and literature.

If, as is reasonable to believe, learning to read a previously mastered construction is easier than learning to read and learning new constructions simultaneously, then beginning reading materials must be accordingly designed. And, even more important, reading must be approached as a continuing process of learning to decipher increasingly more complex and more sophisticated constructions--not merely in elementary grades, but through high school and perhaps into college literature courses. This suggestion is hardly radical, and, in fact, many schools think that this is what they are now doing. Yet they cannot be doing it, since a taxonomy of syntactic difficulty--analogous to the numerous graded word lists that exist--has never been developed. Moreover, many people seem to think that such an approach is not needed since they learned to read without it. The answer to this objection is that it may be true that it is possible, despite all obstacles, to muddle through and finally learn to read; but wouldn't it be simpler to approach a skill systematically, to be alerted to the obstacles before tripping over them?

This same element of efficiency can be applied to teaching composition. If reading is passive recognition of symbols, then writing is the active production of them; and the most efficient way to teach composition is to introduce new constructions through readings and then require them in students'

writing. This is the basic format of almost every creative writing course and freshman anthology, but it is too often limited to rhetorical figures instead of including such non-"creative" areas as sentence structure.

All of which leads to the English teacher's first love--literature. Though we want our students to read great literature, to understand it, to appreciate it, and ultimately to make its lessons part of their inner beings, we seldom succeed in getting them to read it. And this is because they do not understand it. And though part of the trouble is theme, character, and imagery, a much more significant part is syntax: the language they are reading is not the language they speak. But my own controlled experiments show that teaching students the language of literature not only improves their understanding, it increases their appreciation; experience with high school and college students, with Shakespeare and modern authors shows that students are actually excited about the minutiae of grammatical analysis when they see that it is one of the paths to a new world of ideas and enjoyment.[12]

And enjoyment is a central aspect of the dynamique of mature writing. The function of most speech is strictly utilitarian: its purpose is to convey information. When its purpose begins to include impressing the audience, speech moves toward some of the conventions of writing. In contrast, almost all writing includes as part of its purpose the desire to impress the audience --since if they are not impressed they will not read on. Moreover, when meeting a stranger we can never be sure of his language skills and must act accordingly. But certain assumptions are almost always in order about our unknown readers: they are not the television generation; they have chosen to master a skill and can therefore be expected to know and appreciate its conventions. It is this, then, that causes the syntax of writing to differ from that of speech. The syntactic constructions are not necessarily clearer or more logical; they are simply the rules of a game, or, perhaps, the conventions of an art. The writer knows them, and knows that the reader knows them. The rest is playing the game.

And with this in mind, the reader is invited to envision this paper as a speech and see how much would have to be changed--from the visual word-play in the title to the creation of *dynamique* in this paragraph.

Notes

[1]Walter Loban, Margaret Ryan, Jamea R. Squire, *Teaching Language and Literature*, Second Edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969), p. 320.

[2]*Ibid.*, pp. 373-374. A note at this point further refers the reader to Francis Christensen, "The Problem of Defining a Mature Style," *English Journal* 57 (1968), 572-579. As this is an important contribution to the field, there is the suggestion that the authors did at least feel that more than a sentence might be useful.

[3]Karl Wallace, "Towards a Rationale for Teachers of Writing and Speaking," *English Journal* 50 (1961), 384-391; reprinted in Dwight L. Burton and John S. Simmons, *Teaching English in Today's High Schools* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), pp. 291-302.

[4]"Cultural Levels and Functional Varieties of English," *College English* 10 (1948), 31-36.

[5]*The Structure of American English* (New York: Ronald Press, 1954, 1958), p. 556.

[6]*The Oregon Curriculum: Language / Rhetoric* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), vol. 6, p. 452.

[7]William Schwab, *Guide to Modern Grammar and Exposition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 249.

[8]Having thus far defended the honor of the dash, I will leave the reader with the only indefensible example that I have recently come upon--a dash within a dash:

> The American companies--identified as the partners in the Arabian-Americal Oil Company--Exxon, Standard Oil of California, Texaco and Mobil--were said to be acting to depress prices . . . .
>
> *The New York Times*, March 17, 1974, p. 1.

[9]For a clearer understanding of the difficulties in analyzing this structure, the reader may want to consider the following distribution:

a. One source said (that) they felt.... (speech and writing)
b. *One source said, (that) they felt....
c. They felt, one source said, that.... (writing)
d. But one source said (that) they felt.... (speech and writing)
e. *But, one source said, they felt.... (writing)
f. *But one source said, they felt....

[10]"Teaching Second Language Reading at the Advanced Level: Goals, Techniques, and Procedures," TESOL Quarterly 4 (1970), 23.

[11]"Improving Sentence Structure," English Journal 47 (1958); reprinted in Harold B. Allen, Readings in Applied English Linguistics, Second Edition (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1964), pp. 375-381.

[12]For the details of one experiment, see Sharon Katz, "Linguistics and the Study of Shakespearean Plays," in Harvey Minkoff, Teaching English Linguistically: Five Experimental Curricula (New Rochelle: Iona College Press, 1971), pp. 113-178. For a list of syntactic structures likely to trouble high school students, see Harvey Minkoff and Sharon Katz, "Spoken and Written English: Teaching Passive Grammar," College Composition and Communication 24 (1973), 157-161.